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A PAIR OF CANADIAN POETS.¹

Two slender little books of verse by Messrs. Roberts and Carman, printed and bound in the same manner, seem to force comparison of the merits of their respective authors, so evidently are they designed as companion volumes.

In the first place, then, and most conspicuously, these are rural poets condemned to live in cities, the first in New York, the other in Boston—"the city of the golden dome under the gray Atlantic skies." Both are "city-wearied men," weary of the city's fume, stress, clamor, grime, and roar. Mr. Roberts, by means of a striking figure, sets before us a picture of night in a New York street:

The street is a grim cañon carved
In the eternal stone,
That knows no more the rushing stream
It anciently has known.

The emptying tide of life has drained
The iron channel dry.
Strange winds from the forgotten day
Draw down, and dream, and sigh.

Mr. Carman gives us an impression of Boston in the following suggestive stanza:

The wintry city's granite heart
Beats on in iron mockery,
And like the roaming mountain rains,
I hear the thresh of feet go by.

"Iron!" The adjective well conveys our poets' sentiment regarding town life. It might be characterized as rather feminine than masculine. And superficially that life does seem utilitarian, mechanical; all the more need, therefore, to bring out its inherent poetry. For great cities are slumbering volcanoes of passion; they are instinct with dramatic

¹ "New York Nocturnes and Other Poems." By Charles G. D. Roberts. Pp. 84. "By the Aurelian Wall and Other Elegies." By Bliss Carman. Pp. 132. Boston: Lamson, Wolfe & Company. 1898.

poetry, but that fountain is sealed to the lyrists under discussion. They long for the country and the forest—not so much for Nature in her more majestic aspects of mountain and ocean, as for the woods, streams, and winds of Canada. And still we wait with desire the time when our gigantic modern communities shall find a tongue.

The ground tone of both poets (as the Germans would express it) is elegiac; it is grave but not sad—not to say pessimistic; and it is by no means irreligious, but, in the case of the first mentioned, decidedly religious. Their verse is exceedingly easy and fluent; they are fond of the measure known in hymnody as “common metre,” with only one rhyme in a quatrain. Examples of it have just been given. It really seems, considering the fact that they have no Orphic message to deliver as best they can, as if they might pay a little more attention to poetic art—to the harmonies of rhyme and metre. To conclude these resemblances with one little point: they both show fondness for the unusual word “*plangent*.”

Mr. Roberts inclines to an occasional anapæst as a variant among iambic lines:

Not in the palpable dark of woods.

I knew the place was a narrow room.

In the first of these the adjective has to be pronounced “palp’ble”—a practically impossible slur—and in the second the indefinite article must be dropped to bring out the scansion; whereas there is no objection to the following example, but positive approval of it, for the permissible slur therein enriches the verse:

Amid the voyaging companies.

The ruling idea of his “*Nocturnes*” is the perfectly true but not original one that there is no solitude like that the sense of which one experiences in a crowd, or in an intensified degree in a deserted street. His lines “*At the Railway Station*” reveal the human sentiment, raised to a high power, that moves the machinery of modern life. He finds a refuge from the dreariness and weariness of business and the street in love,

in "the sanctuary of love's arms"—and, we may presume, in the thought of a holiday:

When the nut-fed chipmunks romp
Through the maples' crimson pomp,
And the slim viburnum flushes
In the darkness of the swamp.

The above is one of a welcome series of vignettes of the autumnal Canadian forest, through which stalks a Thoreau-like figure, "The Solitary Woodsman," who gives title to the piece, and who might be a symbol of the poet himself. Mr. Roberts is a verbal landscape artist of the mood of William Collins, and some of his pictures remind one of Corot: the stillness of evening, and pale light shed over a landscape steeped in tranquillity. He is possessed by a sense of the mystery of life, and is hopeful of an ultimate solution of its solemn problems. He terminates his work with an "Ascription" to Him

The motion of whose ordered thought
An instant universe hath wrought.

This is a fine and deep couplet—but to the present reviewer the gem of the collection seems to be the little piece called "Life and Art: "

Said Life to Art: "I love thee best
Not when I find in thee
My very face and form, expressed
With dull fidelity;
But when in thee my craving eyes
Behold continually
The mystery of my memories
And all I long to be."

If Mr. Roberts is the more thoughtful of the two, graver, deeper, and clearer, Mr. Carman appears to us to have more of the poetical temperament, to be more imaginatively suggestive. His is a roving genius; favorite terms with him are *quest* and *trail*; his book ends with the words "the endless trail." The ensuing phrases may serve to convey something of the elusive charm that haunts his verse: "the calling vales;" "the thresh of feet;" "the spacious, melting

dark;" "the strong, red, journeying sun;" "the large, sweet night;" "where the long winds stream."

Now the pale summer lingers near,
And talks to me
Of all her wayward journeyings,
And the old, sweet, forgotten things
She loved and lost and dreamed of here
By the blue sea.

There is a strange beauty about certain of these wordings—a visionary quality that wakes the imagination, suggestions vague or vivid, faint impressions, as of something seen or heard in dreams. This is what we value most in Mr. Carman; but in his desire to produce these impressions, to be freshly and vividly descriptive, he experiments too frequently and daringly with novel terms of speech. There is no such word as "skreel," (p. 93), but this may be a misprint; nor is there such a noun as "quench," ("this quench of clay," p. 53), or such a verb as to "far" ("whether God nears or fars," p. 105). He indulges in colloquial terms such as "lazes" and "streel" (for *trail*), and in provincialisms like "swales" (wet land), "keening" (mourning), and "feckless" (spiritless). His use of the rare word "plangent" (p. 49) has already been noted, and we find nothing to object to in the word "rote" ("the hoarse rote of the sea"), so phonetically and onomatopoetically does it express the retreating roar of waves on a pebbly beach; but we do not like the participle "crumbling" as applied to the sea.

His subjects are elegiac, being threnodies for dead men, mostly poets. We have a dactylic experiment on Phillips Brooks, which is a marvel of harsh sound, and strikes one as devoid of genuine inspiration—as written to order; a dirge for Henry George; and verses in memory of Lovelace, Blake, Keats, Shelley, Stephenson, and Verlaine. Indeed, by his elegiac strain, the critical vein that crops out here and there in his poems, and his passion for nature, Mr. Carman reminds us of Arnold, or, better, of Arnold's shadow, Mr. William Watson. It is here that we place him in contemporary poetry. He has Arnold's impatience with the Philistines:

I must sit and hear the babble
 Of the worldling and the fool,
 Prating know-alls and reformers
 Busy to improve on man,
 With their chatter about God.

Ah, no doubt this dear good people
 On familiar terms with God,
 Could devise a parish steeple
 Built to heaven without a hod.

“There is no other way to redeem the world,” he avers,
 “than the way of the rebels and saints.” He betrays a
 sympathy for those who dare to make desire a duty, and con-
 cludes that

Love is the only creed,
 And honor the only law.

He lacks Mr. Watson’s incisiveness, but, for compensa-
 tion, is free from his melancholy pessimism; for he sings:

The husk of life is sorrow;
 But the kernels of joy remain,
 Teeming and blind and eternal
 As the hill wind or the rain.

The influence of the gentle spirit of Longfellow is ap-
 parent both in the matter and manner of this stanza, and the
 resemblance is borne out by another:

Alone in the dusk he sings,
 And the joy of another day
 Is folded in peace and borne
 On the drift of years away.

Finally, the landscape that lingers upon the mental retina
 after finishing his poems is not unlike Mr. Roberts’: a large
 red sun sinking behind wooded hills, a twittering bird note
 in the still air, a meditative evening calm.

GREENOUGH WHITE.